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UNCLAS ZAGREB 001393

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CROATIAN OFFICIALS CONDEMN THE RIOT IN BELGRADE

REF: BELGRADE 1420

1. FOLLOWING THE JUNE 15 ATTACK ON THE CROATIAN EMBASSY IN BELGRADE BY A LARGE GROUP OF SPORTS HOOLIGANS (REFTEL) -- WHICH CAME AFTER SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO DEFEATED CROATIA IN THE WATER-POLO FINALS OF THE EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS IN KRANJ, SLOVENIA -- CROATIA'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP PUT OUT STRONG STATEMENTS OF CONDEMNATION. PRIME MINISTER RACAN REGRETTEED THAT THE VANDALISM IN BELGRADE HAD NOT IMMEDIATELY BEEN CONDEMNED AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS IN BELGRADE. "WE ALL KNOW HOW THE LACK OF PROMPT REACTION TO THIS TYPE OF PRIMITIVISM LED TO THE EVIL THAT OCCURRED IN OUR RECENT PAST," RACAN SAID IN A TELEVISED STATEMENT. THE PM ALSO CRITICIZED CROATIAN HOOLIGANS AT THE CHAMPIONSHIPS WHO ATTACKED SUPPORTERS OF THE SAM TEAM. HE ANNOUNCED THAT HE WOULD PUSH FOR A LAW ON SPORTS FANS TO BE PREPARED ON AN URGENT BASIS.

2. FOR HIS PART, FOREIGN MINISTER TONINO PICULA CANCELED HIS TRIP TO MONTENEGRO SCHEDULED FOR JUNE 16 AND 17. PICULA CALLED THE INCIDENTS THE WORST SINCE THE TWO COUNTRIES ESTABLISHED DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN 1997, BUT HE ALSO EXPRESSED HOPE THAT THE TENSIONS WOULD SUBSIDE SOON. THE SAM AMBASSADOR TO ZAGREB, MILAN SIMURDIC, WHO WAS ON HAND FOR THE FINALS IN SLOVENIA, TOLD US JUNE 17 HE HOPED THE MATTER WAS OVER. HE HAD BEEN CALLED IN TO THE MFA AT 12:30 AM AFTER THE ATTACK ON THE EMBASSY BUILDING IN BELGRADE. HE SAID HE REGRETTEED THAT PICULA FELT A NEED TO CANCEL HIS TRIP TO PODGORICA. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER HAD HE TRAVELED, AND EVEN PERHAPS STOPPED OVER IN BELGRADE ON HIS WAY BACK.

3. DEPLORING THE INCIDENT IN BELGRADE, AS WELL AS THE ONE IN SLOVENIA WHICH PROMPTED IT, PRESIDENT MESIC SAID THAT BLAME CAN USUALLY BE SHARED. "ONE EVENT CAUSES THE OTHER." HE ADDED, HOWEVER, THAT "ORGANIZERS ARE ALSO TO BLAME SINCE THEY KNEW THIS WAS A HIGH-RISK GAME BUT FAILED TO TAKE APPROPRIATE (SECURITY) MEASURES."

COMMENT

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4. THE LATEST INCIDENTS, INVOLVING SPORTS HOOLIGANS ON BOTH THE SERBIAN AND CROATIAN SIDES, ARE NOT LIKELY TO AFFECT SERIOUSLY THE TREND IN THE OVERALL BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP. RELATIONS BETWEEN AUTHORITIES IN ZAGREB AND BELGRADE ARE GENERALLY PROGRESSING -- TO WIT, THE RECENT DECISION BY EACH GOVERNMENT TO DO AWAY WITH, AT LEAST TEMPORARILY, VISA REQUIREMENTS. THE INCIDENTS, HOWEVER, DO SHOW THAT UNDER THE POLITICAL SURFACE WARTIME ANIMOSITIES REMAIN, AND WILL HAVE TO BE MANAGED AS THE PROCESS OF NORMALIZATION UNFOLDS.

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